

The AUCTION BLOCK

A NOVEL OF NEW YORK LIFE

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"The Iron Trail"
"The Spoilers"
"The Silver Horde" Etc.

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SYNOPSIS.

Peter Knight, defeated for political office in his town, decides to venture New York in order that the family fortunes might benefit by the expected rise of his charming daughter, Lorelei. A well-known critic interviews Lorelei Knight, now stage beauty with Bergman's Revue, for a special article. Her coin-hunting mother outlines Lorelei's ambitions, but Blossom, the press agent, later adds his information.

There is a lesson here for the small town girl who thinks she has a call to go on the stage. Too many pretty lasses from the country meet a bad fate in the sordid life of the city and too often success is bought at the price of sorrow.

CHAPTER II—Continued.

"His mother's son. Need we say more? He's a great help to the family, for he keeps 'em from getting too proud over Lorelei. He sells introductions to his sister."

Campbell Pope's exclamation was lost in a babble of voices as a bevy of "Swimming Girls" descended from the enchanted regions above and scurried out upon the stage. Through the double curtain the orchestra could be faintly heard; a voice was crying, "Places."

"Some soul klazzers with this troupe, eh?" remarked Blossom, when the scampering figures had disappeared.

"Yes, Bergman has made a fortune out of this kind of show. He's a friend to the 'Tired Business Man.'"

"Speaking of the weary Wall Street workers, there will be a dozen of our ribbon winners at the Hammon supper tonight."

"Tell me, is Lorelei Knight a regular—er—frequent of these affairs?"

"Sure. It's part of the graft."

"I see."

"She has to place out her salary like the other girls. Why, her whole family is around her neck—mother, brother and father. Old man Knight was run over by a taxicab last summer. It didn't hurt the machine, but he's got a broken back or something. Too bad. It wasn't brother Jimmy. You must meet him, by the way. I never heard of Lorelei's doing anything really bad."

For the moment Campbell Pope made no reply. Meanwhile a great wave of singing flooded the regions at



"You'll Pardon Us for Whispering, Won't You?"

the back of the theater as the curtain rose and the chorus broke into sudden sound. When he did speak it was with unusual bitterness.

"It's the rottenest business in the world, Slooson. Two years ago she was a country girl; now she's a Broadway belle. How long will she last, do you think?"

"She's too beautiful to last long," agreed the press agent, soberly, "especially now that the wolves are on her trail. But her danger isn't so much from the people she meets with as the people she eats with. That family of hers would drive any girl to the limit. They intend to cash in on her; the mother says so."

"And they will, too. She can have her choice of the wealthy rounders."

"Don't get me wrong," Slooson hastened to qualify. "She's square; understand?"

"Of course; object matrimony. It's the old story, and her mother will see to the ring and the orange blossoms. But what's the difference, after all, Slooson? It'll be hell for her, and a sale to the highest bidder, either way."

CHAPTER III.

In his summary of Lorelei's present life Slooson had not been far wrong. Many changes had come to the Knights

during the past two years—changes of habit, of thought and of outlook; the entire family had found it necessary to alter their system of living. But it was in the girl that the changes showed most. When Mrs. Knight had forecast an immediate success for her daughter she had spoken with the wisdom of a Cassandra. Moreover, she took naturally to the work, finding it more like play; and, being quite free from girlish timidity, she felt no stage fright, even upon her first appearance. Her recognition had followed quickly—it was impossible to hide such perfection of loveliness as hers—and the publicity pleased her. In due course rival managers began to make offers, which Mrs. Knight, rising nobly to the first test of her business ability, used as levers to raise her daughter's salary and to pry out of Bergman a five-year contract. The role of the Fairy Princess was a result.

Lorelei had arrived at the point where further advancement depended upon study and hard work; but, since these formed no part of the family program, she remained idle. Proficiency in stagecraft of any sort comes only at the expense of poise, and this girl was being groomed solely for matrimony.

With the support of the family entirely upon her shoulders, she had been driven to many shifts in order to stretch her salary to livable proportions. Peter was a total burden, and Jim either refused or was unable to contribute toward the common fund, while the mother devoted her time almost solely to managing Lorelei's affairs. Presents were showered upon the girl, and these Mrs. Knight converted into cash. Conspicuous stage characters are always welcome at the prominent cafes; hence Lorelei never had to pay for food or drink when alone, and when escorted she received a commission on the money spent. She was well paid for posing; advertisements of toilet articles, face creams, dentifrices, yielded something. In the commercial exploitation of her daughter Mrs. Knight developed something like genius. But of all the so-called "grafts" open to handsome girls in her business the quickest and best returns came from prodigal entertainers like Jarvis Hammon.

As Lorelei and her companion left their taxicabs and entered Proctor's hotel, shortly before midnight, they were met by a head waiter and shown into an ornate ivory-and-gold elevator, which lifted them noiselessly to an upper floor. They made their exit into a deep-carpeted hall, at the end of which two splendid creatures in the panoply of German field marshals stood guard over one of the smaller banquet rooms. Hammon himself greeted the girls when they had surrendered their wraps, and, after his introduction to Lorelei, engaged Lillas in earnest conversation.

Lorelei watched him curiously. She saw a powerfully built gray-haired man, whose vigor age had not impaired. In face he was perhaps fifty years old, in body he was much less. He had a bold, incisive manner that was compelling and stamped him as a big man in more ways than one. Playfully he pinched Lillas' cheek, then turned with a smile to say:

"You'll pardon us for whispering, won't you, Miss Knight? You see, Lillas has got up this little party, and I've been waiting to consult her about some of the details. Awfully good of you to come. I hope you'll find my friends agreeable and enjoy yourself."

Perhaps twenty men in evening dress and as many elaborately gowned young women were gossiping and smoking as the last comers appeared. Someone raised a vigorous complaint at the host's tardiness, but Hammon laughed a rejoinder, then gave a signal, whereupon folding doors at the end of the room were thrown back, and those nearest the banquet hall moved toward it.

Hammon was introducing two of his friends—one a languid, middle-aged man, the other a large-featured person with a rumbling voice. The former dropped his cigarette and bowed courteously. His appearance as he faced Lorelei was prepossessing, and she breathed a thanksgiving as she took his arm.

Hammon clapped the other gentleman upon the shoulder, crying: "Hannibal, I saw your supper partner flirting with 'Handsome Dan' Avery. Better find her quick."

Lorelei recognized the deep-voiced man as Hannibal C. Wharton, one of the dominant figures in the Steel syndicate; she knew him instantly from his newspaper pictures. The man beside her, however, was a stranger, and she raised her eyes to his with some curiosity. He was studying her with manifest admiration, despite the fact that his lean features were cast in a sardonic mold.

"It is a pleasure to meet a celebrity like you, Miss Knight," he murmured. As they entered the banquet hall she gave a little cry of pleasure, for it was evident that Hammon, noted as he was for lavish expenditure, had outdone himself this time. The whole room had been transformed into a bower of roses, great climbing bushes, heavy with blooms. The table, a masterpiece

of silver and white, of glittering plate and sparkling cut glass, faced a rustic stage which occupied one end of the room; occupying the inner arc of the half-circle was a wide but shallow stone fountain, upon the surface of which floated large-leaved Egyptian pond lilies. Fat-bellied goldfish with flimsy fins, and tails like iridescent wedding trains, propelled themselves indolently about.

But the surprising feature of the decorating scheme was not apparent at first glance. Through the bewildering riot of greenery had been woven an almost invisible netting, and the space behind formed a prison for birds and butterflies. Disturbed by the commotion, the feathered creatures twittered and fluttered against the netting in a panic. As for the butterflies, no artificial light could deceive them, and they clung with closed wings to leaves and branches, only now and then displaying their full glory in a sleepy protest.

"How—beautiful!" gasped Lorelei, when she had taken in the whole scene. "But—the poor little things are frightened." She looked up to find her companion staring in Hammon's direction with an expression of peculiar, derisive amusement.

Hammon was the center of an admiring group; congratulations were being hurled at him from every quarter. At his side was Lillas Lynn, very dark, very striking, very expensively gowned and elaborately bejeweled. The room was dining with the strains of an invisible orchestra and the vocal uproar. Becoming conscious of Lorelei's gaze, her escort looked down, showing his teeth in a grin that was not of pleasure.

"You like it?" he asked.

"It's beautiful, but—the extravagance is almost criminal."

"Don't tell me how many starving newsmen or how many poor families the cost of this supper would support for a year. I hate poor people. Now for the ortolans and the hummingbird tongues. No doubt there's a pearl in every winecup. Prepare to have your palate tickled with a feather when your appetite flags."

"That's what the Romans did, isn't it?"

"Are you a student as well as an artist, Miss Knight?"

"I thought you were going to be pleasant, but you're not, are you?" Lorelei was smilingly fixedly. "I'm afraid you don't intend to have a good time, Mr.—" They had found their places at the table, and Lorelei's escort was seating her. "I didn't catch your name when we were introduced."

"Nor I," said he, taking his place beside her. "It sounded like Rice Curry or some other dish, but it's really Merkle—John T. Merkle."

"Ah! You're a banker. Aren't you pretty—reckless confessing your rank, as it were?"

"I'm a bachelor; also an invalid and an insomniac. You couldn't bring me any more trouble than I have." Again he looked toward Hammon, and this time he frowned. "From indications I'll soon have company, however."

"Indeed. Is there talk of a divorce there?" She inclined her head in the host's direction.

Merkle retorted acidly: "My dear child, don't try to act the ingenue. You're in the same show as Miss Lynn, and you must know what's going on. This sort of thing can't continue indefinitely, for Mrs. Hammon is very much alive, to say nothing of her daughters. Let's be natural, at least. I haven't slept lately, and I'm not patient enough to be polite."

"It's a bargain. I'll try to be as disagreeable as you are," said Lorelei; and Mr. Merkle signified his prompt acquiescence. He lit a huge monogrammed cigarette, pushed aside his hors d'oeuvres, and reluctantly turned down his array of wineglasses one by one.

"Can't eat, can't drink, can't sleep," he grumbled. "Stewed prunes and rice for my portion. Waiter, bring me a bottle of vichy, and when it's gone bring me another."

The diners had arranged themselves by now; the supper had begun. A bohemian spirit prevailed; the ardor of the men, lashed on by laughter, coquetry and smiles, rose quickly; wine flowed, and a general intimacy began. Introductions were no longer necessary, the talk flew back and forth along the rim of the rose-strewn semicircle.

Lorelei turned from the man on her left, who had regaled her with an endless story, the point of which had sent the teller in hee-haws of laughter, and said to John Merkle:

"I'm glad I'm with you tonight. I don't like drinking men."

"Can a girl in your position afford preferences?" he inquired, tartly. Thus far the banker had fully lived up to his sour reputation.

"All women are extravagant. I have preferences, even if I can't afford them. If you were a tippler instead of a plain grouch I could tell you precisely how you'd act and what you'd talk about. I'd die if I had to teach you the tango."

Mr. Merkle grunted, "So would I."

She smiled sweetly. "You see, we're both unpleasant people."

Merkle meditated in silence while she attacked her food with a healthy, youthful appetite that awoke his envy. "I suppose you see a lot of this sort of thing?" he at length suggested.

"There's something of the kind nearly every night. This party isn't as bad as some, for the very reason that most of the men are from out of town, and it's a bit of a novelty to them. But there's a crowd of regular New Yorkers—the younger men about town—" She paused significantly. "I



"I Suppose You Know She's Making a Fool of Him?"

accepted one invitation from them. It was quite enough."

"I've traveled some," observed Merkle, "but this city is getting to be the limit."

She nodded her amber head. "There's only one Paris, after all, and that's New York."

The meal grew noisier; the orchestra interspersed sensuous melodies from the popular successes with the tantalizing ragtime airs that had set the city to singing. Silent-footed attendants deposited tissue-covered packages before the guests. There was a flutter of excitement as the women began to examine their favors.

"What is it?" Merkle inquired, leaning toward Lorelei.

"The new saddlebag purse. See? It's very Frenchy. Gold fittings—and a coin purse and card case inside. See the monogram? Lillas picked these out for Mr. Hammon, and they're exquisite. We share the same dressing room, you know."

Merkle regarded her with a sudden new interest.

"Then—I dare say you're close friends?"

"We're close enough—in that room; but scarcely friends. What did you get?"

"A gold safety razor—evidently a warning not to play with edged tools. I wonder if Miss Lynn bought one for Jarvis?"

"No, why did you say that?" Lorelei asked, quickly. "And why did you ask in that peculiar tone if she and I were friends?"

The man leaned closer, saying in a voice that did not carry above the clamor:

"I suppose you know she's making a fool of him? I suppose you realize what it means when a woman of her stamp gets a man with money in her power? You must know all there is to know from the outside; it occurred to me that you might also know something about the inside of the affair. Do you?"

"I'm afraid not. All I've heard is the common gossip."

"There's a good deal here that doesn't show on the surface. That woman is a menace to a great many people, of whom I happen to be one."

"You speak as if she were a dangerous character, and as if she had deliberately entangled him," Lorelei said, defensively. "As a matter of fact, she did nothing of the sort; she avoided him as long as she could, but he persisted, he persecuted her until she was forced to—accept him. Men of his wealth can do anything, you know."

"She had scruples?"

"No more than the rest of us, I presume. She gave her two weeks' notice because he annoyed her; but before the time was up Bergman took a hand. He sent for her one evening, and when she went down there was Mr. Hammon, too. When she came upstairs she was hysterical. She cried and laughed and cursed—it was terrible."

"Curious," murmured the man, staring at the object of their controversy. "What did she say?"

"Oh, nothing connected. She called

him every kind of a monster, accused him of every crime from murder to—

"Murder!" The banker started.

"He just made a long list to beat her down, and she was unstrung. She seemed to have a queer physical aversion to him."

"Humph! She's got nobly over that."

"I've told you this because you seemed to think she's to blame, when it is all Mr. Hammon's doing."

"It's a peculiar situation—very. You're interested me. In a way I don't blame him for seeking amusement and happiness where he can find it, and yet—I'm afraid of the result."

"The city is full of Samsons, and most of them have their Deillaha."

Merkle agreed. "These men, prit Hammon where he is. I wonder if they will let him stay there. It depends upon that girl yonder." He turned to answer a question from Hannibal Wharton, and Lorelei gave her attention to the part of the entertainment which was beginning on the stage. Of a sudden the clamor was silenced, and indifference gave place to curiosity, for the music had begun the introduction of one of Adoree Demorest's songs. Lorelei had never seen this much-discussed actress, whose wickedness had set the town agog, and her first impression was vaguely disappointing. Miss Demorest's beauty was by no means remarkable. She was animated, audacious, vividly alive in a daring costume of solid black, against and through which her limbs flashed with startling effect as she performed her famous Danse de Nuit.

"Hm-m! Nothing very extreme about that," remarked Merkle, at length. "It would be beautiful if it were better done."

Lorelei agreed. She had been staring with all a woman's intentness at this sister whose strength consisted of her frailty, and now inquired:

"How does she get away with it?"

"By the power of suggestion, I dare say. Her public is looking for something devilish, and discovers whatever it chooses to imagine in what she says and does."

Hannibal Wharton had changed his seat, and, regardless of the dancer, began a conversation with Merkle. After a time Lorelei heard him say:

"It cost me five thousand dollars to pay for the damage those boys did. They threatened to jail Bob, but of course I didn't allow that."

"I remember. That was five years ago, and Bob hasn't changed a whit. I think he's a menace to society."

Wharton laughed, but his reply was lost in the clamorous demand for an encore by Miss Demorest.

"So he gets his devilment from you, eh?" Merkle inquired.

"It isn't devilment. Bob's all right. He's running with a fast crowd, and he has to keep up his end."

"Bah! He hasn't been sober in a year."

"You're a dyspeptic, John. You were born with a gray beard, and you're not growing younger. He wanted to come to this party, but—I didn't care to have him for obvious reasons, so I told Hammon to refuse him even if he asked. He bet me a thousand dollars he'd come anyhow, and I've been expecting him to overpower those doormen or creep up the fire escape."

CHAPTER IV.

The hand-clapping ceased as the dancer reappeared, smiling and bowing.

"I will dance again if you wish," she announced, in perfect English, "introducing my new partner, Mr.—" she glanced into the wings inquiringly—

"Senor Roberto. It is his first public appearance in this country, and we will endeavor to execute a variation of the Argentine tango."

Mr. Wharton was still talking. "That's my way of raising a son. I taught Bob to drink when I drank, to smoke when I smoked, and all that. My father raised me that way."

The opening strain of a Spanish dance floated out from the hidden musicians, Miss Demorest whirled into view in the arms of a young man in evening dress. She was still laughing, but her partner wore a grave face, and his eyes were lowered; he followed the intricate movements of the dance with some difficulty. To Lorelei he appeared disappointingly amateurish. Then a ripple of merriment, growing into a guffaw, advised her that something out of the ordinary was occurring.

"The—scoundrel!" Hannibal Wharton cried.

Merkle observed dryly: "He's won your thousand. I withdraw what I said about him; it requires a gigantic intelligence to outwit you." To Lorelei he added: "This will be considered a great joke on Broadway."

"That is Mr. Wharton's son?"

"It is—and the most dissipated lump of arrogance in New York."

"Bob," the father shouted, "quit that foolishness and come down here!" But the junior Wharton, his eyes fixed upon the stage, merely danced the harder. A few moments later he sank into a chair near his father, saying:

"Well, dad, what'd you think of my educated legs? I learned that at night school."

Wharton grumbled unintelligibly,

but it was plain that he was not entirely displeased at his son's prank.

"You were superb," said Merkle warmly. "It's the best thing I ever saw you do, Bob. You could almost make a living for yourself at it."

The young man grinned, showing rows of firm, strong teeth. Lorelei, who was watching him, decided that he must have at least twice the usual number; yet it was a good mouth—a good, big, generous mouth.

"Thanks for those glorious words of praise; that's more than we're doing on the Street nowadays. Whew! Got any grape-juice for a growing boy?" He helped himself to his father's wine-glass and drained it. "You can settle now, dad—one thousand iron men. I owe it to Demorest."

"What do you mean?"

"Debt of honor. I heard she was due here with some kind of an electric thrill, so I offered her my share of the sweepstakes to further disgrace herself by dancing with me." He caught Lorelei's eye and stared boldly. "Hello! I believe in fairy tales, too, dad. Introduce me to the Princess."

Merkle volunteered this service, and Bob promptly latched his chair closer. Lorelei saw that he was very drunk, and marveled at his control during the recent exhibition.

"Tell me more about the 'Parti-color Petticoat' and 'Dental Chewing Gum,' Miss Knight. Your face is a household word in every street car," he began.

She replied promptly, quoting haphazard from the various advertisements in which she figured. "It never shrinks; it holds its shape; it must be seen to be appreciated; it's cool, refreshing, and prevents decay."

"How did you meet that French dancer?" Hannibal Wharton queried, sourly, of his son.

"I stormed the stage door and waylaid her in the wings. She thought I was you, dad. Wharton is a grand old name." He chuckled at his father's exclamation.

"Where did you learn those Argentine wiggles?"

"Hard times are to blame, dad. The old men on the exchange play golf all day, and the young ones turkey-trot all night. I stay up late in the hope that I may find a quarter that some suburbanite has dropped."

The elder men rose and sauntered away in the direction of their host, whereupon Bob winked.

"They've left us flat. Why? Because the wicked Miss Demorest has finally made her appearance as a guest. My dad is a splendid shock absorber. Naughty, naughty papa!"

"It's probably well that you came with her; fathers are so indiscreet."

Young Wharton signaled to a waiter who was passing with a wine bottle and a napkin.

"Tarry!" he cried. "Remove the shroud, please, and let me look at poor old Roderer. Thanks. How natural he tastes." Then to Lorelei: "The governor is a woman hater; but no man is safe in range of your liquid orbs, Miss Knight. Wouldn't mother enjoy reading the list of Hammon's guests at this party? Among those present were Mr. Hannibal C. Wharton, the well-known rolling-mill man; Miss Lorelei Knight, principal first-act fairy of the Bergman Revue, and Miss Adoree Demorest, the friend of a king. A good time was had by all, and the diners enjoyed themselves very nice."

He laughed loudly, and the girl stirred.

"She'd be pleased to read also that you came late, but highly intoxicated."

"Ah! Salvation Nell!" Bob took no offense. "If the hour was late she'd know my intoxication followed as a matter of course. I am a derivative of alcohol, the one and infallible argument against temperance, Miss Knight."

"You talk as if you were always drunk."

"Oh—not always. By day I am frequently sober, but at such times I am fit company for neither man nor beast; I am harsh and unsympathetic; I scheme and I connive. With nightfall, however, there comes a metamorphosis. Once I am stocked up with ales, wines, liquors and cigars, I become a living, palpitating influence for good, spreading happiness and prosperity in my wake."

"Do you consider yourself in such a condition now?" queried Lorelei, vaguely amused.

"I am, and, since it is long past the closing hour of one and the tango parlors are dark, suppose we blow this 'Who's Who in Pittsburgh' and taxicab out to a roadhouse where the bass fiddle is still inhabited and the second generation is trotting to the 'Robert E. Lee'?"

Lorelei shook her head with a smile. "I don't care to go."

"Strange!" Mr. Wharton helped himself to a goblet of wine, appearing to heap the liquor above the edge of the glass. "No, if I were sober I could understand how you might prefer these 'pappy guys' to me, for nobody likes me then, but I'm agreeably pickled. Merkle won't take you anywhere, for he's full of distilled water and has a directors' meeting at ten."

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